

How Love Grows

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We are studying through the book of Philippians on Sunday mornings at Truth Community Church here in the summer, probably into the fall as well, and I invite you to turn to Philippians 1. We have reached a wonderful prayer of the Apostle Paul that is so instructive for us in our Christian lives. Philippians 1:9 which we first introduced last week says this, he says,

9 And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, 10 so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; 11 having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Now as we opened it last time, one of the things that we said and our primary point last time was that love is a great priority in biblical faith, and we saw that in the fact that love is the great commandment as Christ expressed in Matthew 22. Here in the context of Philippians 1 as Paul turns to prayer, you can see that this concept of love is at the center-most part, it is at the premium position in his praise, he says, "And this I pray," and he immediately turns to the topic of love. As we've said multiple times in the context of Philippians, this was a church that was a good partner of Paul, they excelled in many ways but they were marked by some strains of division, there were marks of false doctrine that were influencing them, and so Paul is praying for them preparatory to what he has to say in the later course of his letter. His prayer anticipates the themes that he is going to explain in the remainder of chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4, and he starts with this preeminence of love.

Now there are a couple of things to say about that. Last time, we saw the priority of love and one of the things that we said was that love is not primarily about a sentiment or emotion that we feel inside and is subjective to us, it is a commitment to seek the well-being of others, and the fact that Paul has to pray for it in this church, the fact that so much Scripture is directed toward teaching us about the nature of love and calling us to love, 1 Corinthians 13 for example, tells us something really fundamental and basic that I want to bring to your attention right at the start. It's the fact that with this kind of praying indicating that something needed to grow in the congregation, and with that kind of instruction found throughout Scripture, there is something that should occur to us, it is

that love is not always automatic in the Christian life, it is not automatic, and also that it is not always obvious what true love looks like and what we should do that would be loving in any given situation. There is an element of growth that is needed in love and we need to understand what it is that causes love to grow if we are actually going to grow in this Christian virtue of which Scripture says so very much. I remind you that Christ said it's your love that will show that you are disciples, it is love that is the mark of the church, it is love which sent Christ to the cross on our behalf, and yet we find if we think about it at all and we observe some of these basic things in Scripture, that somehow in one way or another we don't automatically love the way that we should and we don't always understand what it is that we should do that would even be loving in the first place, and so this is what we want to come to grips with here this morning.

To state it one different way: to practice love is not as obvious as it might seem, to practice love is more difficult than it might seem at first if you're just used to thinking about it in sentimental ways. And to illustrate this, I want to take you to an unexpected place in Scripture, go to Ecclesiastes 3, if you will. Ecclesiastes 3, immediately after the book of Proverbs in your Bibles, and in Ecclesiastes 3 we see these polar opposites brought together in a series of related statements. Ecclesiastes 3 says this,

1 There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven-- 2 A time to give birth and a time to die; A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted. 3 A time to kill and a time to heal; A time to tear down and a time to build up. 4 A time to weep and a time to laugh; A time to mourn and a time to dance. 5 A time to throw stones and a time to gather stones; A time to embrace and a time to shun embracing. 6 A time to search and a time to give up as lost; A time to keep and a time to throw away. 7 A time to tear apart and a time to sew together; A time to be silent and a time to speak. 8 A time to love and a time to hate; A time for war and a time for peace.

Now beloved, without at all trying to exposit that passage, I just want to point out to you that there are sometimes when one action is called for, and another time when a seemingly almost directly diametrically opposed action is called for. Some situations you should speak, other situations you should remain silent, for example. Some situations you should rebuke, some situations you should comfort. Some situations you should show grace and compassion, other times call for confrontation. And as you go through life, if you think about life on any serious level at all, you realize that this is embedded into the nature of life. How do I respond in each given situation that I face since different situations call for different responses and different people call for different interactions depending upon the circumstance and need of the moment? Those of you who are parents know this intrinsically. You have some children who need a firm hand of discipline upon them, if not a firm swat on their bottom to fix them and to correct them in their youthful foolishness. You have others who are easily bruised, of tender conscience and of sensitive spirit where the action that your other child needs would crush them, and you deal with them differently, you deal with them lovingly, you deal with them in a softer way because the different person calls for it. Well, multiply that by all of your

relationships and all of a sudden you realize that interacting and loving people is more involved than it might seem at first glance because there are different times and there are different peoples calling for different responses at different times.

So the question then becomes is how do you do that, then? And how do you grow in love that you might be effective in love, recognizing that different people have different responses that are called for, different needs that you might not even recognize? How is it that we grow in love, then? Well, Paul's prayer is directed to that very issue and if you go back to Philippians 1, I want to read the text once more to keep it fresh and full in our minds even though we're only going to concentrate on verse 9 here this morning. Paul says, "And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God." For all of their wonderful attributes, this church had room to grow and Paul sees preeminently that they had room to grow in the knowledge and in the nature of their love.

Now look at verse 9 with me here. He says, "And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more." You get a picture of something that is growing over time, and you could picture it in the sense of clouds that are billowing and the great white clouds that are forming before a storm comes, that those clouds are just billowing and expanding out and growing right before your very eyes. That's a picture of what Paul is describing here, what he is praying for is that your love which is already in existence, which your love which is already in practice, would start to expand more and more, that it would be more effective, that it would grow more in discernment, and so his prayer is that the love of this church would grow still more, and by extension it becomes a prayer that we would have for our own body here at Truth Community Church.

Well, how does love grow like that? That's what we want to look at this morning and we'll look at it from three perspectives here. First of all, love grows in Christ. Love grows in Christ. As we have said in multiple messages throughout this series, there is a Christ-centered focus to everything that is said in the book of Philippians and we come back again and again to Christ as though the spokes of a bicycle wheel always pointing back to the hub from which they come, to which they are anchored, and this growth in Christian love must always be anchored in Christ first and foremost, first and preeminently, vertically centered before we think about the nature of love horizontally and how we would act or interact with anyone in any given particular point, and context is telling us this, context is telling us to remember Christ first and foremost.

Look at verse 8 which is the last statement that he makes before he explains the nature of his prayer in verse 9. He says in verse 8, he says, "God is my witness, how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus." Now what we said last time was that Paul is saying that the concern and the interest and the things that motivate him in ministry toward the Philippians are rooted in a spiritual reality of his union with Christ; that it is the affections of Christ that are working in his heart that are motivating his actions, are motivating his words as he says, "And the desire that I have for you," Paul says to the Philippians, "the

desire I have for you is so full of Christ, it's because Christ is at work in me and I am longing after you in accordance with the nature of Christ who is at work in my heart as His apostle." And so he has had Christ in his mind as he immediately starts to tell them how he is praying for them.

Then if you go on in verse 11, you go on in verse 11 and he says, "I pray that your love will abound, approve the things that are excellent, be sincere and blameless," he says, and look at a here in verse 11, that all of these things would manifest themselves in your life because you have "been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God." He says, "I'm praying for Christ to be at work in your heart, for Christ to produce this kind of fruit in your life." So he had just said, "It's at work in my life," he says, "I'm longing for you with the affection of Christ Jesus," and then his prayer is that, "your love would grow and billow out more and more as a product of you yourselves having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes from Christ."

So we start to see that it is only in the context of our union with Christ, our knowledge of Christ, only as a result of the work of Christ in our own hearts that we find this source of love and where this love grows from, and that's the general context of it. As you go on in chapter 2, verse 1, he comes back shortly later to come back to this love of Christ again as the focal point, the emphasis on what he has to say to them. Look at chapter 2, verse 1 with me, "Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love," Christ and love joined together in back-to-back clauses in his statement as he is about to exhort them, "if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose." Verse 5, "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus." And so he is pointing them, beloved, he is pointing them again and again, pointing them back to Christ, pointing them back to the one who loved them and gave himself up for them, pointing them back to the cross where Christ was obedient unto the point of death, even death on a cross it says there in verse 8, at the cross manifesting this perfect selfless love for his people that he might save them and redeem them, and then having saved them, that his love would be reproduced in ever expanding ways in their lives here on earth to be perfectly culminated in the glories of heaven. So this love of which he speaks grows in Christ. Christ is the source of our love. Christ is the example of our love. Biblical love flows from our union with Christ and Christ being the great God and Savior that he is, saves us in order to do a work in us to produce replications of this kind of love that he had for us, to produce it in our lives. It comes from him and that's what we are to understand.

I want to come back and just remind you of something that I said a little earlier in the course of the pastoral prayer this morning to help us focus our minds and to give us a sense and to kind of stir up our hearts to plow the grounds of our heart to be receptive to this kind of work of Christ in our lives. Here you are in Christ today and praise the Lord for that. Here we are gathered together as a fellowship of believers, praise the Lord for that, that we can come together seeking each other's good and seeking to manifest the love of Christ to one another. Here you are in Christ being on the receiving end of the

forgiveness of your sins. Here you are on the receiving end of Christ being in the realm of his salvation, having his Spirit dwell within you if you are a true Christian, and that the love of God has been poured out abroad in your heart, Romans 5 says, realizing that you are on the receiving end, my fellow sinners, we are on the receiving end of mercy we did not deserve. We are on the receiving end of mercy that we did not deserve, that came from Christ, and that we now stand in a perfect standing before God based on a righteousness that is not our own. It is not by works of deeds that you have done with your own hands, it is not by your obedience to the law that you have any standing before God, our standing before God is rooted in the righteousness of Christ himself that he has freely shared with us, that God has imputed to us as his gift to us in the great work of justification. So here we are, we stand before God in a righteousness that is not our own, we stand before God with our sins having been taken away, cleansed from our soul, cleansed from our account by the shed blood of Jesus Christ, and that we enjoy this position as a result of utterly undeserved mercy, patience and grace that Christ has shown to us.

Now, you see, that is meant to be the place where your mind dwells and that we would grow in understanding of this, and when we do, it has a kind of a twofold effect on us. First of all, it humbles us. It humbles us to have received such mercy from the hand of a loving God that we did not deserve, and it humbles us even further to realize that this love which is centered in Christ, which was procured at the cross, is not of our own doing; that our righteousness before God, our access to God is based on something external to our works, external to our abilities, external to our righteousness because we have none of our own to offer. We approach God on a righteousness and on a blood that was shed for us that was done at his initiative on our behalf that is outside of us, and we realize that we glory in this wonderful position that we have in Christ and we say, "Where did that come from? Oh, He loved me like that. He loved me enough to rescue me and to redeem me and to restore me and to draw me when I would not be drawn of my own will." And all of a sudden our hearts are humbled vertically before God, our hearts are softened vertically before God toward Christ, and that is the soil in which our love grows.

Now that has an implication for us, then. There's a conclusion that we can draw from that. A man who is lacking in love in his life, a church that is lacking in love in their congregational life, is somehow lacking in Christ, and I don't mean that they are not saved as I say that, I simply mean that the fruit of salvation has not reached its ripe and full maturity when love is lacking in a life or in a congregation because perfect love would understand the vertical dimension of the vastness of God's love for us and be so overwhelmed by it that it would just flow naturally out of everything that comes to pass in our lives, and the fact that there is a disconnect, that there is a difference between the love of Christ and what's shown in our lives, is an indication that, what? We need to grow. That we need to have Christ work in us to elevate us more and more to the manifestation of the love that he showed to us first. So to the extent that love is lacking in your life, to the extent that there is conflict and disharmony, the immediate first step is not to go immediately trying to solve that, the human conflict, the answer is always to come back to Christ because he is the source of our love.

Now to say that is one thing, to understand how the process works and how you grow, that's another thing and that's what we want to look at with our second point here this morning. We've said that our love grows in Christ and, secondly, our love grows in knowledge. Our love grows in knowledge, and Paul makes this irrefutably clear in the nature of his prayer.

Look at chapter 1, verse 9 with me again. He says, "And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more," what? "In real knowledge." There is a sphere of knowledge in which love is grown. You could say that knowledge – I'm a little reluctant to use this illustration, this metaphor, but I think it's helpful – that knowledge is the kind of fertilizer that is applied in the mind and in the heart that helps love to grow and to accelerate in its growth. Knowledge is necessary for love to grow and if we think about that at all, beloved, we could see why it has to be the case. You see, we know Christ because he has been revealed to us in the Scriptures. Christ is revealed to us in God's word and so a knowledge of Christ is rooted in revealed truth, it is found in what God has made known to us in the pages of Scripture. So to know Christ we must find him in his word. It is his word that testifies to Christ and it is his word that gives us the understanding that is necessary for us to grow in the knowledge that produces real love. Paul says, "I'm praying that your love would grow," then he says, "in this sphere, this sphere in which love grows, the realm in which it abounds is found in real knowledge." I'm just following the sentence that he wrote 2,000 years ago.

Now real knowledge in the Greek is a compound word that intensifies the noun. The sense of real knowledge is thorough, genuine knowledge, not simply an acquisition of facts but an understanding that is rooted in depth and that is rooted in a transformation of mind. You see, beloved, what biblical truth does for you, the way that God uses truth in our lives, is that truth changes the way that you think. It informs the way that you think. It contributes to your sense of understanding so that as you are responding in the sphere of relationships that God has given to you – watch this – a transformed mind is going to transform the way that you respond, a transformed mind is going to generate a more mature and transformed nature of love to those around you than would otherwise be the case. You see, beloved, biblical truth guides the way that you are to think and the way that you are to practice love.

Now let me step back for a moment here. In the day and age, the culture in which we live, love is preeminently defined as accepting people for exactly what they are, whoever they are, without being critical of anything, certainly without exercising any kind of judgment about what they do or what they think or the god they believe in or the life, we're just supposed to accept everybody in the name, so-called, of love. Now we as Christians need to be careful not to be sucked into that damning vortex of a false definition of love. It is not loving for us to look at people and accept a concept that says every religion leads to God. That's not true. Every religion does not lead to God, and for the sake of our love for Christ and for the sake of souls in front of us, we have to have clear in our mind that "there is salvation in no one else, for there is only one name that has been given under heaven by which men must be saved," Acts 4:12. It is Christ himself who said, "I am the

way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me." Therefore it is not loving for us to affirm people in false religion, it is not loving for us to refuse to evangelize them, it is not loving for us to accept what they say they believe without challenging it with revealed truth, because the outcome of those things is death, it is judgment, it is eternal destruction for those who do not come to Christ. And therefore the loving thing for us to do is to proclaim Christ to them in the power of the Holy Spirit and according to his revealed word rather than staying silent and letting them go on their way in their delusion, in their deception, only to wake up and find that after they drew their last breath on earth they were in an intermediate state of punishment awaiting their resurrection for eternal destruction at the end of time. That's not loving, but the only way that you can understand that, the only way that you can understand that that kind of evangelistic, and I'm just using an illustration here, that that kind of evangelistic confrontation is loving is to have your mind informed by revealed truth. This is a lost soul that needs Christ. For me to accept them in the name of love is the most hateful thing that I could do if I withheld truth from them that they needed for the salvation of their souls.

So love grows in knowledge and that kind of knowledge and the exclusivity of Christ affects the way that we would love our neighbor in matters of evangelism, just to use an example. So we see that biblical truth guides the way that we are to think and to practice love. One writer said this: spiritual knowledge gained from an understanding of divine revelation enables the believer to love what God commands and in the way that he reveals. To use another example to just help illustrate how this works and how this plays out in very real and practical ways. Suppose you have a Christian young man who wants to be married and has a potential partner before him but his girl is not a Christian, not even interested in spiritual things, how do you love a person like that? How does that Christian young man love her? Is it by proceeding in marriage to her? That would not be a good way to try to love her because it would not be informed by the biblical truth that says we are not to be joined together with unbelievers. There is a failure there but the only way that you see that is when your mind is informed by biblical truth that lets you discern what is right and what is wrong, what is loving and what is not. So love must be informed by knowledge and that knowledge comes in a sense that we obey what we understand and we act in obedience to God and trust that he will work out his loving purposes in our lives and in the lives of others as we are faithful to his truth rather than trying to calculate the horizontal consequences of what we do and try to manage it on our own. The place of love, the place of knowledge, the place of obedience for all of us is found in understanding truth and living it out as obediently as we know how in the context of the relationships that he has given to us.

So biblical love is not a tolerant disposition that accepts everything that anyone might say or do. Biblical love – oh, beloved, we said last time that biblical love is directed toward the well-being of the object of our love, very true – biblical love is also directed toward the things that God approves and the things that God approves are things that he has revealed in Scripture, and sometimes we don't understand how that plays out, how that's the most loving thing to be or to do, but we're growing in real knowledge, we are relying not on our own judgment or on our own wisdom and thoughts, rather we are relying and

being guided by what Scripture says and letting that direct us, and when our minds are transformed by an understanding of God's word and God's word starts to become the source of our motivations in relationships, then there will be this growing of genuine true love in Christ because the Christ who saved us is revealed in Scripture and is the one who is working in our hearts as we give ourselves over to his word. So we see that the preeminence of the word in love and we see that one of the most awful hateful things that anyone does is when they attack and undermine the authority and trustworthiness of God's word in the minds of those who are under their instruction because you are cutting them off from the very thing that would save them, you are cutting them off from the very thing that would cause them to grow in love, it's from real knowledge.

One last thing I would say about this, about love growing in knowledge, beloved, is this, and this is also humbling for us to come to grips with, the truth is that you and I do not naturally know such things. We do not have an intuitive grasp of what God's will and what God's thoughts would be that would inform our direction. We don't naturally know it and so we have to learn. I'm going to take you to a couple of Scriptures in just a moment. We have to come to a position, one of the crucial bridges in your Christian growth is when you cross the bridge from trusting in your own understanding and perceptions, you cross the bridge and you leave that behind in the sense that I'm about to describe, and you submit your thoughts and you submit your judgments to what God has revealed in his word and you let God's word determine what truth is even if in the moment it might seem counterintuitive to you. That's so crucial.

Look at Isaiah 55 and in our proud and self-sufficient and autonomous age, this is one of the most countercultural things that we could see from God's word, is to see this very theme of which we are speaking about this morning at this very moment. In chapter 55, verse 8, God says this, he says,

8 "... My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," declares the LORD. 9 "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts."

There is this recognition plainly stated in God's word that the way that he thinks is different from the way humanity thinks, and that his thoughts and his great omniscient eternal mind are so far higher and beyond what we could think that they are not even worthy to be compared to one another. As a result of that, because our mind and our perspective and our lives are limited and finite and hindered by sin, because of that we have to come to the point where we trust not in our own judgment but we let our sense of judgment and discernment be informed first and foremost by what God's word says. That's why we focus on the word of God here at Truth Community Church, it's why you as individual Christians need to develop a lifetime pattern of being a reader and studier of God's word. You need to be in God's word in order for this to be informing your mind. It is God's will for you in Christ Jesus that you would be a reader and a studier of his word. And I'm grateful to have so many of you here that love God's word and that's why you come. I know that so many of you read. Well, let me just reaffirm and tell you that's what you need to be doing, yes. And those of you that perhaps have let this slip away from

your daily routine, this is a time and this is a message to bring you back to that which is the vital nerve center of your spiritual life, God's word, not your own thoughts.

Turn over back in the New Testament for another passage that helps us see these things in 2 Timothy 3; in this particular context, I want to draw this out to you. What we're saying is, just by way of reminder, that love grows in true knowledge, that true knowledge comes from God's word and we need that true knowledge from God's word to inform us, to help us grow in love and we see this reflected in 2 Timothy 3:16 and 17 where it says,

16 All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; 17 so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

Every good work, an embracive term. Embracive, not abrasive, just to be clear here. Every good work being an embracive and all-embracing reference to everything that you need to live a godly Christian life. Part of living a godly Christian life is knowing how to love and what we find is that Scripture teaches us that way, it corrects us when we stray from it, it reproves us when we have strayed from it, and then it restores us and brings us back to the point where we can do what is righteous in God's sight, all of this being rooted in the nature of Scripture pointing us to how we live, how we live being in part by love and love being informed by real knowledge and all discernment. So we need the word of God. It is the word of God that gives us knowledge that becomes the soil in which love can grow because love grows in knowledge.

Now what Paul's asking for here, then, in the book of Philippians as he's praying, you can turn back there, the fact that he's praying about it tells us something, it points us to something. It points us to a fact that this is something that requires a supernatural power, a supernatural energy from God, a supernatural, to use the word the theologians use, we need an illumination from the Holy Spirit to help us grasp these things. We need the work of the Spirit of God in our hearts to expand our understanding, to deepen it, to give us a sense of discernment going forward, and we need the help of the omniscient Spirit of God to expand our ability to grasp those things and that's why Paul asks, he says, "God, help me do this. God, help them do this. They can't do it on their own, God, they need an act of You in their hearts to give them the ability to grow in this way."

So he prays for it. It's not simply a matter of sending somebody off to a little room and giving them a table and a chair and a book and saying, "Read and study and grind it out with your own effort." There is effort but the effort is in vain if God is not at work by his Spirit helping us to grasp and understand and so we pray these things. This is how Paul prayed for the Philippians. I would suggest to you that it's a good way for you to think about praying for yourself and praying for those around you. "God, help us grow in love together. Expand our sense of knowledge and our understanding that as we grow in our minds, that we would grow in our love as well," because the natural thing that you might first think may not be the most loving response in the situation that is in front of you. So love grows in knowledge and God's word helps us there.

Thirdly, finally this morning, love grows in discernment. Love grows in discernment. Look at verse 9 with me again. He says, "And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment." Discernment is referring to a concept of moral perception; an ability to look at a situation and perceive what is right and wrong; to perceive – watch this – to perceive even that which is best from that which is merely better, and it leads to, discernment leads to wise practical applications of knowledge. And at the risk of repeating something that I said earlier in the message, as we go through our lives in marriage, in work, in family, and in relationships, within the body of Christ, outside the body of Christ, every conceivable realm that you could think of, isn't it true that you are constantly facing choices about what to do? What's right and wrong? What better and best? What do I continue in? What do I withdraw from, whether activities or relationships? What do I continue in? What should I give myself to? "I've only got a limited amount of time, God, what's the best way for me to use that time? And my time is limited, Lord, there are people that will receive me in my ministry and my love, and there are others who won't. God, what's the best way for me to use my time in light of those choices that I have to make with limited resources and with limited ability?" Well, that calls for this kind of discernment, what is right, what is wrong, and here in this context I would suggest to you in writing to believers who had been partners with him in the Gospel, that sometimes the choices and the improvement, the development, the maturity is being able to distinguish between that which is better and that which is best: what is the best thing to give your time to, your love to, your affection to, your resources to? You certainly have all kinds of Christian organizations that want your money, right? Well, what do you give it to? "God, we need discernment to be able to choose, to pick those kinds of things."

What Paul is expressing here in his prayer is that discernment, moral perception, informs the choices that love makes. It informs the choices that love makes and there are times where the loving thing to say to someone is, "No. I can't do that because I have another priority that I need to give preference to. I'm sorry I can't help you with that particular need that you have because there are matters in my home that I need to attend to first. Maybe here you could find help, maybe there are other people that you could call." All I'm saying here, all I'm giving you an example of is the sense that love is not saying yes to everything and everybody because you have to make choices. Discernment needs to inform your choices and discernment is rooted in knowledge that comes from God's word.

How are we to know which things are which? How do we know what is best and what is only better? Oh, we have to abound in truth, abound in love that is growing in knowledge and discernment and I believe that you will find, if you have not already found this in your Christian experience, I say this without fear of contradiction, that the humble submissive believer who is regularly applying himself to God's word will find that the very process of being in Scripture will sometimes bring a light to a situation and there will be understanding and thoughts will occur to your mind that you hadn't thought of and say, "This is the way forward for me." Even if it's not directly related to the word, the very process of submitting yourself to the influence of the Spirit of God he uses to give you insight beyond even the things that you are reading and suddenly there is a clarity,

"This is what I say in this situation. This is what I need to do." Little things and big things. This is one of the gifts that God has given to us in his word, is that it has that influence, that ability to impart discernment and understanding and direction to our lives and the believer that drinks readily from this fountain finds that his thirst is satisfied. The believer that looks for direction in life from God's Word finds the map helps him find the way forward.

So beloved, for you to grow in love, you need to be rooted in Christ. Have you come to him in true repentant faith? Have you come to him in the first instance saying, "Save me a guilty sinner"? For those of us that are in Christ, do you see how Scripture calls us to a consistent application to itself? I rejoice with the fact and over the fact that you're here this morning giving yourself over to God's word because I know that God's word has that impact in the lives of those who believe, and so I rejoice with the fruit that God's word will produce in your life, that you need to be reading Scripture consistently and, beloved, I say it gently, you need to be with God's people when it is taught. We need to be together. We need to fellowship together. We need to draw together like coals around a fire that can keep each other warm in our affections, keep us warm in our intentions because this is one of the means that God has given for us to grow in grace, to grow in love, to practice not what is better but that which is best and to lead us in that direction.

I'm about done here, beloved. Time goes by really quickly, doesn't it? As we do those things, as we read God's word together, as we study it together, as you read it privately, as we teach it together corporately, what we see from this passage with the Apostle Paul is that, I'm going to use a word in a really strange way just to make a point, we baptize it, by which I mean we immerse it. We clothe all of that interaction with God's word in prayer. We immerse it in prayer, prayer that God would cause his love to abound still more and more in us and through us and in those that are under the object of our praying, the objects of your intercession.

At the risk of repeating myself, beloved, in things that I've said in the past, isn't it obvious that the people for whom you pray what their preeminent need is is spiritual? Scripture says that a man's sickness he can bear, but who can bear a broken heart? We can bear with physical difficulty if the spiritual aspect of life is correct. The spiritual aspect of life is found in growing in love that abounds in real knowledge and all discernment, and so as we pray for one another, we are praying in a sense that we're starting increasingly to embrace and accept and practice this spiritual dimension to what prayer is intended to be. "God, I pray for them that their love would grow in real knowledge and all discernment. God, I pray that You would sanctify them in the truth even as Christ prayed for us that we would be sanctified in the truth. God, God, I pray that You would take that hardship and so work by Your Holy Spirit in their lives that You would conform them to the image of Christ even though it is hard for them now. God, bring forth fruit out of this rocky place in life that they find themselves that they might grow in real love and in all discernment." My point being, my point being that we're not simply going through the motions and not simply engaging in external actions of checking a time clock on our quiet times, "I got my 15 minutes in. Good to go." We're talking about engaging the word of God and engaging the Spirit of God with a full-hearted desire to be transformed by it, and so we

pray that God would cause his love to abound still more and more in our hearts by his Holy Spirit.

Look at Romans 12:1-2.

1 Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. 2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by [what? by what?] by the renewing of your mind, [that you would grow in real knowledge and all discernment] so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

You come to God's word, your mind is transformed, and then you live that out in the sphere of relationships and opportunities and sorrows that the Lord has given you and thereby manifest what the will of God is, thereby manifest what a sanctified Christian life increasingly looks like, but we never lose sight of the work and the central role of the Holy Spirit in this. Galatians 5:22, the fruit of the Spirit is, what? Love. The fruit of the Spirit, what the Spirit produces is love. The Spirit takes God's word, renews our mind and produces that fruit in that way. That's how love grows and with that ever-transforming dynamic going on in us day by day, week by week, month after month, then in love we say, "Ah, with the people that are around me, the people that God has given to me, I seek their interests not my own."

Let's pray together.

Father, we ask You, the only thing that we could ask You after this text, we pray it individually, we pray it corporately, and this we pray, that our love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment so that, our Father, we may approve the things that are excellent in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ, having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God. And thus, Father, ending on the note of the glory of God, we gather all of this up in light of Your word and we say, oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God, how unsearchable are Your judgments and unfathomable are Your ways. Who has known Your mind, O Lord, who became Your counselor? Who gave to You first that You might pay it back to him? No, Father, in all of these things we deny ourselves, we humble ourselves and out of the fullness of body, soul and spirit, Father, we proclaim that from You and through You and to You are all things. To You, our gracious Master, to You, our Lord Jesus, be the glory forever. Amen.

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